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GILBERT COPE

1840–1928

HISTORIAN
GENEALOGIST

By
ALBERT COOK MYERS

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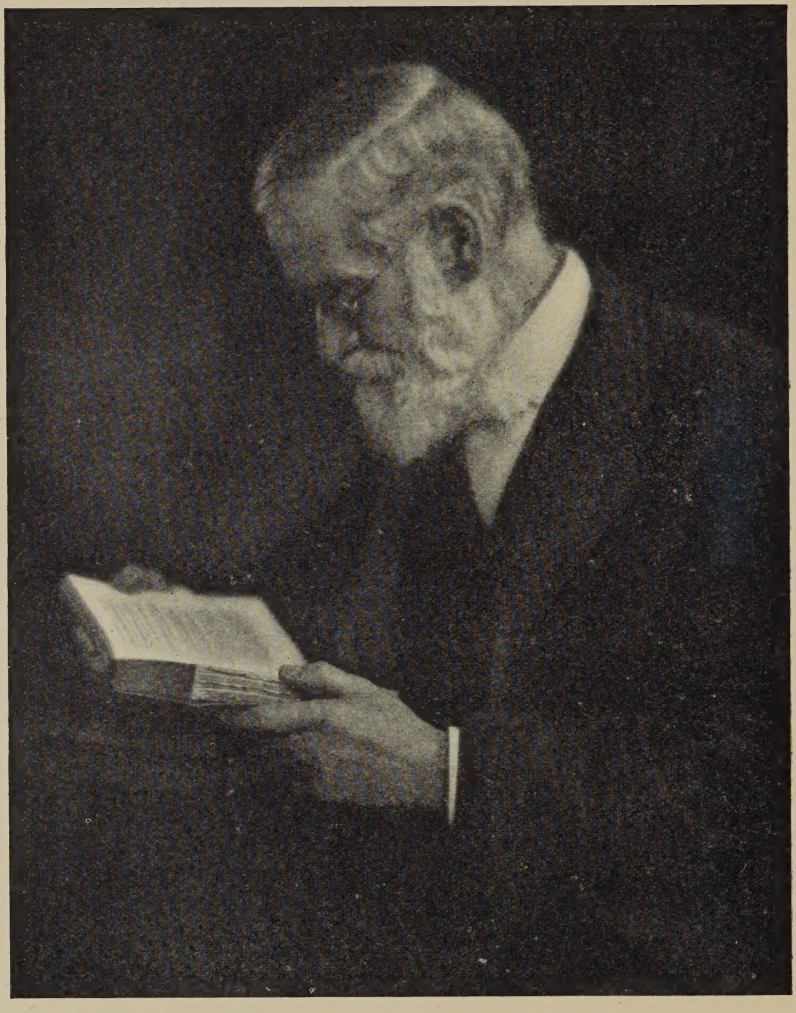

Gilbert Cope
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GILBERT COPE

By Albert Cook Myers

"The Quaker of the olden time,
How calm and firm and true."—*Whittier.*

"The father of genealogical research in Pennsylvania."—*Frank Willing Leach.*

Leaving a truly remarkable record of three score and ten years of devotion and contribution in his chosen field, Gilbert Cope, the widely-known Quaker genealogist and local historian, having reached the venerable age of 88 years and 4 months, died December 17th, 1928. This was at the pleasant country home of his eldest son, Herman Cope, in Middletown Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, between Media and Chester, where, under kindly care his later years were spent; interment was by the side of his wife in Oakland Cemetery of the Orthodox Friends, near West Chester.

The youngest of eight children, as his father was before him, Gilbert Cope was born August 17th, 1840, in East Bradford Township, Chester County, Pennsylvania, two miles west of West Chester. His birthplace, a fine old stone mansion on the ancestral Cope homestead, amidst the rich and beautiful rolling lands of the Brandywine, still stands, to the south of the Strasburg Road and near the former Black Horse Inn.

Gilbert Cope was fifth in descent from Oliver[1] Cope (c. 1647-1697), one of William Penn's First Purchasers in England, who, arriving in Pennsylvania from Abury, Wiltshire, in 1683, settled upon his grant of land, on Naaman's Creek, just over the Circular Line, in New Castle County, present State of Delaware. It was the immigrant's son, John[2] Cope (1691-1773), who established the family in Chester County. He chose a location on the east side of Brandywine Creek, East Bradford Township, where he purchased his land in 1712. There he lived in the employment of farmer and maltster. He became a Quaker, in membership with Bradford Meeting. By his wife, Charity Jefferis (1695-1743), daughter of Robert and Jane (Chandler) Jefferis, he had a son, Joseph[3] Cope (1740-1820), farmer, stone mason and maltster, who, having bought land close to his father, in 1767, made his home upon it with his wife, Ann Taylor (1749-1803), daughter of Benjamin and Sarah (Nookes) Taylor.

Joseph[4] Cope, Jr. (1794-1870), son of the latter couple and father of the subject of this memoir, inherited the homestead, occupied and farmed it, at the same time dealing somewhat in livestock. Much interested in the improvement of the latter, he went to England in 1839 (having made a prior visit in 1820), and brought back some fine specimens of Durham cattle and Southdown sheep, of which he was an enthusiastic breeder for many years. He was actively interested in local affairs and in those of his religious society. Educated at John Comly's Boarding School at Byberry, Philadelphia County, Joseph Cope possessed considerable literary taste, especially for the old standard English authors, in correspondence seldom omitting to quote from a favorite poet or prose writer. In family discipline he was rather severe, by the account of his son Gilbert, who, writing of him in 1918, says that if Joseph's children "behaved themselves fairly they got along without much friction, but I heard reminiscences of a raw-hide whip which was freely used until my oldest brother buried it. When it came to my turn, a resort was had among the currant bushes in the garden, and I am sorry to have to say that he was more feared than loved by me."

Gilbert Cope's mother, Eliza Gilbert (1799-1862), whom his father married as a second wife in 1838, was born in Sewickly Township, Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, daughter of Abner and Ann (Cooper) Gilbert and granddaughter of Benjamin and Elizabeth (Walton) Gilbert, of Byberry, Philadelphia County, who with Abner and others of their children were carried into captivity by Indians in 1780, from what is now Carbon County, Pennsylvania. "My mother," writes Cope, "was one of the kindest-hearted persons and would never do anything to give pain of body or mind."

His eldest sister taught him to read, and the "Story of Jack Halyard "* was the first book he read. After attending a family school he received his later education at the Friends' School in West Chester, and at the Westtown Friends' Boarding School.

In 1852, when Gilbert was 12, the family removed to a more spacious three-story mansion, "Highland Home," built by his father on a commanding location on the eastern part of the farm. At this early age he became interested in botany, and

* William S. Cardell, *Story of Jack Halyard, the Sailor Boy; or, The Virtuous Family*, Philadelphia, Uriah Hunt, 1827.

at length learned the printing of natural leaves and plants in color, using them as type. He papered several rooms with the result of this work and made up a book of over 800 specimens of leaves. Almost to the last of his days it gave him pleasure to display to visiting friends a large bed-spread decorated in this way.

In 1857, however, when he was 17, his attention was turned to genealogical research and he began to gather Cope family data. At "Highland Home" he set up a hand printing press of his own and printed some of his early publications.

Upon the death of his father, Gilbert Cope, in 1872, removed from the farm to West Chester, where he remained for 48 years. Upon his marriage, in 1880, he built a new house at 532 North Church Street. Here he assembled his great and unrivaled genealogical and historical collections and issued the chief of his printed works. For the safety of the most important collections he had a fireproof vault built so as to open into his library. His peculiarly retentive memory of these accumulations, aided by systematic arrangement, in wooden cabinets of his own skilful handiwork, made their contents readily available to him.

Under the comfortable Church Street roof-tree kindly hospitality was dispensed to many friends and also to a large number of those who came seeking help from his rich stores.

Although research became his profession, yet more often than not he asked no compensation for his information, especially exempting public causes, fellow workers or young beginners. When he did make a charge, it was a very modest amount for what was received. He did more perhaps than any one else for the preservation of Quaker records, and to make these sources available, having copied thousands of pages and made abstracts of births, deaths and marriages from those of his own country and many from other counties and states, as well as abroad. He did much gratuitous work in repairing and mounting into books, largely by his own hands, many thousands of loose Quaker meeting papers.

From time to time over a long period of years he did much to preserve and arrange the archives of Chester County, mounting thousands of loose papers into volumes, thus saving many records from destruction.

In 1905 and 1907 he and his wife spent over nine months in London copying many volumes of the early Quaker registers

of England and Wales for The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania. Although their expenses were met by interested persons, yet they freely gave their own services for the good of the cause.

In 1920 he broke up his home of forty years in West Chester and went to live with his son Herman. At that time his collections, comprising several motor-truck loads, were acquired by The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Council of which appointing the following to serve as curators: Charles Francis Jenkins, Gilbert Cope, Ernest Spofford and Albert Cook Myers. This important accession has been assigned to three of the Society's departments. The printed books, maps, newspapers and the like have been added to the regular collections. The original historical papers, many of which date from the time of William Penn, historical notes, photographs, prints, etc., have been placed in the Manuscripts Division. The copied genealogical materials, including Quaker meeting registers and minutes, other church records, graveyard inscriptions, tax lists, etc., along with the very voluminous "Family Data," in all filling some hundreds of volumes, were committed to the care of The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, and that Society is spending considerable time and money on the mounting and binding of this portion of the collection. These results of the labors of a lifetime, made without haste and without pause, have been fully labeled "The Gilbert Cope Historical and Genealogical Collection," and in themselves, thus safely and permanently preserved and freely open to the public, under reasonable restriction, constitute an enduring monument to Gilbert Cope.

In personality Cope was marked by the old-time Quaker simplicity and sincerity, with an exceeding exactness and caution of statement, as well as a certain tenacity of purpose, yet he was pleasant and sociable in his quiet, unobtrusive way. Although reared in the traditions of the Orthodox Friends, yet this did not affect his friendly relations either with those of the other branch, or indeed with those of whatsoever persuasion. While well informed on general subjects, yet he loved to dwell upon his specialties, and genealogically thus to interrogate those whom he first met: "Now, who was thy father? What was thy mother's maiden name? Who was thy grandfather?"

He was much in demand for the preparation and reading of

papers at family reunions, historical meetings, anniversaries, and the like, rather for the great value of the papers as real contributions to the subject than for their suitability to a popular audience, length and fullness of detail and lack of historical imagination and interpretation making his papers easier to be received through the eye rather than through the ear.

He was one of the founders, in 1893, of The Chester County Historical Society and was one of its most active members, serving for twenty-seven years as its Secretary and as a Director; also honorary Director to the last. He was a member of Friends' Historical Association, etc.

In 1861 he was made a corresponding member of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania and of The New England Historic Genealogical Society. In 1912 he was elected an honorary member of The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania and in 1924 one of its honorary vice-presidents. He had the honor of serving his turn, 1911-1912, as President of The Pennsylvania Federation of Historical Societies, comprising 75 historical organizations of the State.

In 1880 he married Anna Garrett (1848-1918), daughter of David and Mary Ann (Hoopes) Garrett. She was an able assistant to him in his work. Two sons, Herman and Joseph, and a daughter, Ellen, as also four grandchildren, survive.

Among the tributes paid to Gilbert Cope, on his 88th birthday, were those by:

Hampton L. Carson: "I send you a message from The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, of which I am the President, in recognition of the valuable services you have rendered in a fruitful life to the cause of History. Your works, especially relating to Chester County, your labors for the Society and your unrivaled collections of material of supreme importance, now in its possession, have made you a part of ourselves in elucidating the history of Pennsylvania, and will carry your name and fame to a distant posterity. The name of Gilbert Cope can never be forgotten. You have built a lasting monument in the hearts of all the students of our growth as a Commonwealth."

John Frederick Lewis: "Gilbert Cope is the best informed, most experienced and most skillful genealogist that Chester County has ever produced. His knowledge of the County's early families is unequaled and his knowledge of the Quaker families is practically complete, and in thus writing I am not exaggerating but dealing in the plain language always desired by Friends.

Gilbert Cope is preeminently the historian of Chester County. His

writings are monumental, and what is more, they can be relied on for accuracy. Rarely indeed does he make any statement which is not the fact, and if he is not sure of his ground he frankly so records. Notwithstanding the fact that the commencement of his labors dates back many, many years, his investigations have always been characterized by that scientific accuracy which the present age demands. In his historical work he has not accepted unqualifiedly what others have written, but has gone back as largely as possible to original sources and has quoted those sources in support of his writings.

Probably Gilbert Cope's most enduring work in behalf of Chester County, and of West Chester particularly, is the vast mass of material which he gathered throughout his many and active years of life and which is now deposited safely in The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. This material is being arranged and indexed so that it will be accessible to those who desire to consult it, and no one can write the history of a Chester County family or write the history of Chester County itself without first examining and exhausting this material.''

Charles P. Keith: ''I think that, as President of The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, I can voice the feelings of the whole Society in sending birthday congratulations to you, whom we are proud to list as one of our Honorary Vice-Presidents.

We are happy to have with us in life as venerable a pioneer in the field where we are still working. You in your industrious career, antedating the transcribing and abstracting which our Society has undertaken and is pursuing, have gathered important information from sources unknown or practically inaccessible to the older generation. Your notes and collection of printed matter, so fortunately transferred to The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and therefore a means of saving time and expense to those who consult them, are an extremely valuable help to all genealogists concerned with the old families outside of Philadelphia. Without what you have done, one-third of the land covered by settlers in Penn's time would, with its former population, have been a distant country to the students at the metropolis.

In the subject of history, broader than the mere showing of family relationship, you have added to and extended information. While there have been old essays concerning or including the region southwest of Philadelphia, and while the compendious and exhaustive *History of Chester County* to which your name is attached was compiled in collaboration with Hon. J. Smith Futhey, there is in it 'enough glory for two'.''

Miss M. Atherton Leach, Corresponding Secretary of The Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania: ''No other Pennsylvanian has made so comprehensive, or so valuable a contribution to the cause of Pennsylvania family history, as you. Few genealogists of our land have attained your eminence in your chosen field. Your researches have helped and will continue to help all workers in the paths along which you so early blazed the trail. Many have had reason to bless your indefatigable zeal.''

Albert Cook Myers: ''Gilbert Cope has done more than any one else,

past and present, for the cause of Chester County history by his indefatigable lifetime gathering of a great collection of fugitive historical materials and by the use of much of these materials in his numerous printed contributions to our local history and genealogy; also by his many years of zealous interest in causing the early records in the Chester County Court House at West Chester to be bound and preserved. He is noted among historians for his meticulous accuracy in the copying in his copperplate hand of historical documents and also for his care and precision of historical statement. It was he who really wrote the *History of Chester County,* which is known to the critics as one of the best for the whole country. An expert photographer, he has made a large collection of photographs of historical documents, ancient buildings, and the like, now included, with his negatives, in 'The Gilbert Cope Historical and Genealogical Collection' as preserved in the fireproof building of The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia.

He has long been regarded as at the front among Pennsylvania historians and genealogists. Ever has he been generous with his rich stores of information to his fellow historians. All honor to this grand old man of Chester County history while he is still with us.''

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Gilbert Cope in his Library at his West Chester Home, 1918. Vault Door to Right

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